CELEBRATING

ALBERTA'S FAMILIES

Study paper prepared for
The Lieutenant-Governor's Conference -
Celebrating Alberta's Families

Edmonton, Alberta
February 19-21, 1990

Families and the Community

The judgements and opinions reflected in this paper are solely the views of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of the Alberta Government.

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92-00930/

Families and the Community[1]

Abstract

This paper is about the linkages between families and the communities in which they live.

The first section examines the context of communities. It emphasizes the importance of language, immigration, ethnicity, mobility, and rural-urban characteristics in shaping communities and families. The community is the environment in which families live.

Section two reviews some of the research on the relationships between community characteristics and difficulties experienced by youngsters.

The third section argues that the effect of the community on children is filtered through families.

The final section emphasizes the importance of a community development approach in the provision of services and programs to families within the different communities in which they reside. It illustrates programs which encourage people within communities to work together to reduce or resolve the problems unique to that community.

1 Parts of this paper are based on an earlier paper entitled "Family Policies, Community Context, and Preventive Services to Families" (Larson, 1989b).

Families Live in Communities

Families[2] live in communities. They raise their children in communities. Their needs for life's essentials (nutrition, pure water, and air) are met or unmet in communities.

In communities, families work, have homes, buy groceries, go for walks, attend movies, theatre and sporting events, and send their youngsters to school. In their communities, they birth their children and bury their loved ones. In communities, they experience excitement and disappointment, good times and times of hardship, periods of calm and of crisis.

"Families living in a given community share a sense of its identity through community imagery, unique weather patterns, the particular topography and waterways, the transportation system, the local reporters in the newspapers and on television, and even rivalry between cities."

Families living in a given community share a sense of its identity through community imagery, unique weather patterns, the particular topography and waterways, the transportation system, the local reporters in the newspapers and on television, and even rivalry between cities. In communities, people experience most directly the political ramifications of rural, municipal, provincial and federal programs.

Families not only live in communities, they also find meaning in their everyday lives through their families, housing, neighbourhoods, churches, and voluntary associations in their communities (Berger and Neuhaus, 1977).

Even in troubled communities, the basis of community recovery is families helping one another (Ferre', 1987). It is important, then, to examine the relationships between families and communities in Alberta.

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2 The term "families" is not used as a synonym for the traditional nuclear family. The term is intended to include, by way of convenience, the nuclear family (father, mother and children), extended families, single parent families, remarried families, and marriages (e.g., first marriage, remarriage). Another issue is that parts of families (e.g., grandparents, non-custodial parents, students in college) frequently live in differing households or communities.

Communities as the Nation's Grass Roots

Arthur Wileden (1970) argued nearly two decades ago that the "grass roots of the nation are found in local communities..." He contended that if these communities are economically sound, and physically, morally, and spiritually healthy, then the nation will be as well. The nation's character and validity are represented in microcosm in the local community.

Typically, the community means the place where we live, while our "sense of community" is our "we feelings" about that place and the quality of the relationships we have with our neighbours.

Many writers are calling for a rediscovery of community in this sense. Prominent psychiatrist Scott Peck (1988) says "it is our task - our essential, central, crucial task - to transform ourselves from mere social creatures into community creatures . . . it is the only way that human evolution will to able to proceed".

"...it is our task...to transform ourselves from mere social creatures into community creatures...it is the only way that human evolution will to able to proceed."

Communities are places where individuals, families, and organizations build meanings, construct relationships, and assemble futures.

Communities and Families Fit into a Social Context

Communities vary by type (rural, urban), size (small hamlets to mega-cities), scope (provinces, nations, the global village), and quality of life (divorce, pollution, crime, employment, services). The people who live in communities also vary by characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, occupation, and family structure.

Multiculturalism Plays Key Role in Alberta

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Canada is a pluralist nation: a mosaic of histories, regions, cultures, languages, ideologies, and communities. Ishwarin (1980) argues that the family is the key factor in preserving cultural identities and in providing styles of adaptation which make change less violent. Social status and religion often play a significant insulating role in defining identity and preserving values, attitudes, lifestyle, customs, rituals and thought patterns.

Ishwarin organizes ethnic families into three groups:

1) families less resistant to change and more responsive to adaptation though also preserving certain ethnic traditions in Canadian culture (e.g. Ukrainians, Poles, Greeks, Japanese, Chinese);

2) families ideologically and consciously opposed to mainstream society typically with strong religious views (Mennonites, Doukhobors, Hutterites); and

3) indigenous families (native Indians, Inuit) who have been abruptly and involuntarily dominated by "alien" cultural systems.

Who Lives Where

According to analysis by Driedger (1987), people with British origin predominate in the Atlantic provinces, Ontario and British Columbia. New Brunswick and Quebec are predominately of French origin. People of European origin create a mosaic on the Prairies. Aboriginal groups predominate in the Northwest Territories. Larger Canadian cities are becoming more multicultural; non-Caucasians bring visible racial, religious, and cultural heterogeneity to urban life.

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Ethnicity and religion are linked. The larger Catholic denominations are concentrated in Quebec and New Brunswick. Anglican groups are mostly found in Newfoundland and British Columbia. British people are more likely to be Anglican or United Church members. A greater variety of Protestant groups tends to predominate on the Prairies. While ethnicity seems to remain important to Canadian culture, perhaps due to continuing support for ethnic diversity, the religious linkage seems increasingly less important.

Bibby (1987) and others (Statistics Canada, 1985) have documented the decreasing attention to church and religion in Canada. This slippage is more apparent in the West than in either central or eastern Canada. A recent Gallop Poll (September 22, 1989) shows church attendance down to about 29%.

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The percentage who declare themselves as unaffiliated with any religious group continues to increase, again to a larger degree in Western Canada (13% on the Prairies, 25% in British Columbia).

The most recent Alberta Area Survey (a random sample of all Albertans) shows that 18% of the 1200 respondents had no religious preference.

Table 1: Official Languages, Ethnicity, Immigration and Mobility, Alberta and Canada, 1986 (in percentages)

	ALBERTA	CANADA
Official Language		
English Only	92.4	66.8
French Only	.1	15.8
Eng. & French	6.4	16.2
Other	1.1	1.2
	100.0	100.0
Ethnic Origin		
Single Origins	59.4	72.1
British	42.6	35.1
French	5.6	33.8
German	13.2	2.1
Ukranian	7.7	5.0
Aboriginal	4.0	1.5
Scandinavian	3.7	2.0
Polish	3.5	1.9
Other	19.7	18.6
Multiple Origins	40.6	27.9
	100.0	100.0 100.0 100.0
Place of Birth		
Non-Immigrant	84.2	84.4
- Born in Prov. of Residence	69.9	84.5
- Not born in Prov. of Res.	30.1	15.5
- Immigrant	16.8	16.6
	100.0	100.0 100.0 100.0
Immigrants		
USA	9.9	7.2
Other Americas	5.5	8.7
U.K.	20.7	20.3
Other Europe	36.1	42.0
Africa	3.5	2.9
Asia	22.9	17.9
Other	1.4	1.1
	100.0	100.0

	ALBERTA	CANADA
Immigration by Time Period		
Before 1946	13.4	10.4
1946-1966	32.0	39.9
1967-1977	30.3	31.2
1978-1982	17.5	12.3
1983-1986	7.8	6.2
	100.0	100.0
Mover Status (Population, 5+ yrs. old)		
Non-Movers	49.2	56.3
Movers	50.8	43.7
Non-migrants	34.8	35.5
Migrants	16.0	8.2
	100.0	100.0 100.0
Movers From		
- w/in census division	18.0	21.7
- w/in same province	34.9	47.5
- From different province	35.8	20.5
- From outside Canada	11.3	10.3
	100.0	100.0
Labour Force Participation		
Males		
- 15+ (% of total)	82.7	77.5
- Married (%)	86.4	81.4
Females		
- 15+ (% of total)	62.5	55.9
- Married (%)	63.3	57.2

[1] Based on Statistics Canada Catalogue 94-117 (1987). Data obtained in 20 percent random sample.

Table 1, based on 1986 census data, shows that Alberta has several quite distinct characteristics compared to Canada as a whole. Albertans are more likely to say that they have multiple ethnic origins (41% versus 28%). The percentage of Aboriginal, Scandinavian, and Polish people living in Alberta is about double the Canadian average. More than six times as many people of German origin live in Alberta, while more than five times as many French Canadians, on average, live elsewhere in Canada. Ninety-two percent of Alberta residents speak only English, compared to 67% in Canada. One-tenth of 1% speak French only, compared to 16% in Canada. About 6% of Albertans speak both French and English, compared to a Canadian average of 16%.

Table 1 also presents 1986 data on Alberta immigration and mobility. There are only modest differences between the averages for the rest of Canada and those in Alberta. Two important patterns, however, stand out:

- Albertans are less likely to have been born in Alberta (67% vs. an 84% average in all of the other provinces),
- people who move are much more likely to move into Alberta than into the other provinces, on average, although mobility is only slightly higher in Alberta compared to Canada (51% vs. 44%).

"...people who move are much more likely to move into Alberta than into the other provinces..."

Housing Provides Sense of Place

Housing is an important aspect of a sense of place in community life. A "house" is a place of security, private address, and independence. Most Albertans (63%) live in single-detached dwellings, 85% of which are owned (Statistics Canada, 1989). About 34% live in duplexes, townhomes, apartments, and related housing, of which 84% are rented. The remainder live in mobile housing. Some housing (about 7%) needs major repair - safety, sanitation, and maintenance (McInnes, 1987). Native people and low-income immigrants are more likely to live in these structures than other Albertans. In addition, many are either homeless or temporarily sheltered in emergency or transitional accommodation. A recent study in Edmonton estimates 2,285 to 3,570 homeless persons in Edmonton alone (Edmonton Coalition, 1987). According to typical estimates, at least 20% of homeless persons are families left without homes because of spouse abuse, divorce, or father abandonment (Bingham, et al., 1987).

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Ethnicity, religion, and housing are salient aspects of family and community life. These factors play a significant role in how individuals and families interact (with whom, what they do and don't do) and spend their time (types of organizations in which they are involved, uses of leisure time). Becoming an adult in these differing families and communities inevitably leads to differing perceptions of social reality.

"...in 1871, eight out of every ten persons lived in rural areas compared to 1981 where nearly eight out of every ten persons lived in urban areas."

The "sense of community", community services and programs, and the renewal of family and community well-being must take these issues into account. Respect for local values, informed and extensive consultation with key ethnic and religious leaders, and representative participation are important goals for responsive community leadership.

Rural-Urban Shift Overshadows Marital and Family Status

Perhaps the most glaring trend is the massive shift from rural to urban areas. Kalback (1987) reports that in 1871, eight out of every ten persons lived in rural areas compared to 1981 where nearly eight out of every ten persons lived in urban areas (76%).

Table 2: Marital Status, Family Structure, and Children at Home, Urban-Rural Areas, Alberta and Canada, 1986 (in percentages).

	TOTALS		URBAN-RURAL AREAS					
			CANADA			ALBERTA		
	CANADA	ALBERTA	Urban	Rural Non-Farm	Rural Farm	Urban	Rural Non-Farm	Rural Farm
Population			76.5	20.0	3.5	79.4	13.1	7.5
Marital Status								
Children (-15 yrs)	21.4	24.0	20.1	25.1	24.9	22.8	27.8	26.2
Single (+15 yrs)	21.3	20.4	22.3	18.0	22.4	21.1	16.8	20.3
Married	47.6	47.1	46.9	50.0	50.0	46.6	48.1	50.7
Separated	2.0	1.8	2.3	1.4	.5	2.0	1.4	1.7
Widowed	4.9	3.7	5.3	4.1	2.0	3.9	3.8	1.4
Divorced	2.7	3.2	3.1	1.7	1.0	3.6	2.0	.9
Non-Single								
Married	83.0	84.3	81.4	87.5	94.5	83.0	86.8	94.7
Separated	3.6	3.2	4.0	2.5	1.0	3.5	2.5	.9
Widowed	8.6	6.7	9.2	7.1	3.2	7.0	6.9	2.7
Divorced	4.8	5.8	5.4	2.9	1.3	6.5	3.7	1.7
Family Structure								
C-F Families	87.4	88.2	86.1	90.7	94.9	87.0	91.2	95.2
Lone-Parent	12.6	11.8	13.9	9.3	5.1	13.0	8.8	4.8
Male Parent	17.8	17.7	16.1	25.4	40.3	15.8	27.3	42.8
Female Parent	82.2	82.3	83.9	74.6	59.7	84.2	57.2	57.2
Children at Home								
C-F w/children	62.6	63.0	61.4	65.0	72.5	62.1	64.2	69.9
C-F w/o children	37.4	37.0	38.6	35.0	27.5	37.9	35.8	30.1

[1] Based on Statistics Canada Catalogue 94-128 (1988).

N.B. Urban (1,000+ population with a density of 400+ persons per square kilometre)

Rural non-farm (towns with fewer than 1000 inhabitants)

Shifts by marital status are quite apparent. For both Canada and Alberta, there are more single people, more separated and divorced persons, more widows, and fewer married persons and children in urban areas. Exactly the reverse is apparent in rural-farm areas. The proportion of divorced persons in Alberta is greater, regardless of area of residence, than in the rest of Canada.

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Husband-wife families are much more predominant in rural than in urban areas in both Alberta and Canada. In Alberta, 87% of urban families are husband-wife families compared to 95% on the farm.

The remaining families are either male or female lone parent families. Of the 63,655 urban lone parent families (13% of all urban families), 16% are headed by males and 84% by females. In contrast, of the 2,175 farm lone parent families (4.8% of farm families), 43% are headed by males and 57% headed by females. Part of the reason for this difference is widowhood. There are about 60% more widowed persons on the farm than divorced persons. As shown in Table 2, rural-farm families are more likely than urban families to have children at home. This pattern is similar across Canada.

How the Community Affects Families

The ways in which communities and families care for their children is important. The fallout from either inadequate or detrimental community conditions is most directly experienced by children. In a comprehensive study of a Nova Scotia county (Hughes, et al., 1960), psychiatric disturbance was strongly connected with sociocultural disintegration (as measured by "high frequency of broken homes, few and weak leaders, few patterns of recreation, high frequencies of crime and delinquency, and weak and fragmented network of communications").

Another more recent U.S. study (Kogan, Smith and Jenkins, 1977) found a significant relationship between psychological difficulties in children and community stress (as measured by "proportion of families receiving Aid to Dependent Children, rates of premature and out-of-wedlock birth, prevalence of venereal disease").

"Families living in poverty areas have 30% higher infant mortality rates and are 30% more likely to give birth to infants with low birth rates."

Families living in poverty areas have 30% higher infant mortality rates and are 30% more likely to give birth to infants with low birth rates (Sanger, 1979). Transportation problems, welfare systems, housing and related community issues are systematically related to the well-being of families and their children (Davis and Reynolds, 1977; Street, Martin, and Gordon, 1979).

The community affects child disorders indirectly, while the family's effects on the development of mental disorders in children and adolescents are direct (Rutter, 1981). The effects move from the community, to the family, to the child. In a study by Garbarino and Crouter (1978), two measures of family income, a measure of mobility, the percentage of single parent households, and the proportion of employed mothers with young children together explained 81% of the causes in child maltreatment.

"...the higher the "index" of community disorganization, the more likely that even healthy families will suffer relational trauma."

The community conditions (resources, amenities, work programs, services, programs, support networks) interconnect with families variously vulnerable to differing community conditions. Indeed, the higher the "index" of community disorganization, the more likely that even healthy families will suffer relational trauma.

Rural Situation Quite Different

The situation of families and communities in rural areas is quite different. Murri and Haigh (1989) indicate that Alberta's rural communities have experienced a history of growth and decline.

In the last 50 years, for example, Alberta has lost over 50,000 farms to the advent of larger farms. Farms grew, on average, from 160 to 640 acres. Most rural towns (in the 1,000-10,000 range)

grew faster than the provincial rate between 1976 to 1981, but rural town growth has dropped to below the provincial rate since 1981. The boom-bust phenomenon was particularly apparent in resource towns.

In general, Alberta experienced a sharp increase in social and family problems throughout both the boom and bust period (Larson, 1979a, 1979b). The Murri and Haigh paper (1989) focuses on the problems of the rural non-farm towns and emphasizes that the key to revitalization is close association with urban values and economies. Their argument is only applicable, however, to those towns close to a city.

Stress Poses Major Problem for Farm Families

Stress poses the major problem farm families face. About 25% of all farms in Western Canada face financial stress due to one or more factors:

- the debt load exceeds 40% of farm sales;
- borrowed funds in a year exceed 110% of new investment in that year; and
- net worth equals less than 15% of total assets (Klein and Barichello, 1985).

In addition, the prices of products do not match the cost of inflation (Abercrombie, 1986).

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Farming is ranked as the 10th most stressful occupation among 136 careers (Stroh and Keating, 1989). According to Walker and Walker (1987), the list of stressors in farm families is long and growing. Even so, much has been written about the resilience and determination of the farm family, the trends notwithstanding. Farm families remain "community" oriented (Leckie, 1987; Stroh and Keating, 1989).

Families, and their children, in rural areas are significantly more influenced by people moving out to urban areas, the amalgamation of smaller farms into larger ones, and national policies on the value of agricultural products, than by local community issues.

Research is severely lacking on the linkages between the local community environment and family life.

The Stress of Everyday Life

ress in everyday life. Families run out of time because of increased work loads, commuter time, second jobs to help cope with the cost of living, time consumed in dual work households, and extra time demands in lone parent families (Larson, 1989a). Several people interviewed in an article on neighbourhoods (Kubish, 1989) wonder whether "community" is possible in modern society. Mortgage payments and life style choices can force both fathers and mothers to work outside the home in both urban and rural areas. Family and community time is in short supply in both urban and rural areas.

Community Development Poses Solution

"Community development happens when people living in the community take responsibility for directing the course of change based on the needs and interests they identify."

Community development happens when people living in the community take responsibility for directing the course of change based on the needs and interests they identify. The major thrust is grass roots self-determination of local community people motivated by common concern and action. Although some family-oriented community programs in Alberta are increasingly cast in a community development frame of reference, most are of the "services provided" variety.

Here are some of the things that are happening (or according to many, should be happening) to facilitate community and family well-being. Most projects with specific family-oriented developmental focus, as reported in the journals, are based in the United States or elsewhere. Two specific areas are: empowering parents and empowering youth.

Empowering Parents

Parents used to be an intricate part of community life - schools, churches, volunteer organizations - places where their young were linked to other adults, to each other, and to society. One of Hamilton's (1988: 46-49) major recommendations for reducing or resolving problems youth face in low income areas is to empower parents.

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His recommendations include: parental involvement in the governance of elementary and secondary schools; helping parents and teachers communicate with each other more effectively; planning education programs for youth about drugs, sexuality, and values; greater control in law enforcement and neighbourhood crime watches which threaten youth (alcohol, drug pedalling, pornography, etc.); and planning ways of creating a sense of community through events, facilities, etc.

The thrust of empowerment is to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives. The purposes of empowerment are:

- to recognize and foster strengths and competencies;
- acknowledge and utilize the wisdom of everyday experience;
- promote diverse ideas and approaches; and
- strengthen social networks and community institutions (Hughes, 1987).

Hughes' ideas were applied to rural communities. The "family support" movement is a grass roots innovation in community service in the United States (Halpern, 1988; Stehno, 1986) and increasingly in Canada (Anglin, 1989). Anglin (p.7) argues that empowerment represents "a respect for the inherent wisdom of ordinary people, an acceptance of a variety of family forms and styles as valid, a sensitivity to cultural and ethnic differences, and a focus on strengths rather than on problems".

"...empowerment represents 'a respect for the inherent wisdom of ordinary people, an acceptance of a variety of family forms and styles as valid, a sensitivity to cultural and ethnic differences, and a focus on strengths rather than on problems'."

Empowering Youth

"...community-based programs... supplement weakened families with community-based 'extended families' that...help restore the consistent discipline and self-respect of children and teenagers may have lost."

Several of the more innovative community-based programs (CBO's) have been concentrated in communities with high rates of juvenile crime, high risk problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, high school dropouts, neglected or abused youth, unemployment and related problems. These programs supplement weakened families with community-based "extended families" that, along with ethnic and cultural matching, help restore the consistent discipline and self-respect children and teenagers may have lost. The strategy also includes establishing or locating stable, quality, legal employment (not make-work project) which offer potential for advancement.

The Argus CBO program (Sturz and Taylor, 1987), for example, achieves a success rate of 70% in terms of:

- no further involvement with juvenile justice systems;
- less involvement with drugs;
- better program attendance;
- higher academic scores;
- getting a high school diploma; and
- getting and keeping jobs.

A church-based program called the "Ponce Playa Project" (Ferre', 1987) provides health services (doctors, nurses, dentists, and family health workers), alternatives to formal education (such as tutoring for youth who wish to return to school, photography, cosmetology, etc.), co-parents and foster grandparents as extended family, job training and meaningful employment, as well as other services.

Comprehensive Community Programming

It seems important to eliminate or reduce redundancy in delivering services to meet the same child and family needs. Insuring a variety of essential services, integrated into a comprehensive service module, and readily accessible to the individual or family client with multiple needs, requires explicit coordination.

Communities need the necessary funds, essential political support, the time essential for caregiving activity, and motivated grass roots community leadership for integrated, comprehensive family-based services to become a reality.

Summary

Families and communities do not exist in isolation from the rest of society. Family values have a historical, ethnic, religious, and community context. The research seems to indicate that families are directly influenced by the community in which they live and they, in turn, have a direct influence on the emotional and behaviourial health of their children. Integrated, comprehensive community-based programs and services for families will be most effective when they empower the users to be involved in their own development.

"Integrated, comprehensive community-based programs and services for families will be most effective when they empower the users to be involved in their own development."

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